Jordan Journal of Modern Languages and Literatures Vol.17, No. 1, 2025, pp281-299

JJMLL

Longing to Belong: The Quest for Home in Suzan Abulhawa's *The Blue Between Sky and Water* (2015)

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Received on: 17-4-2023 **Accepted on: 17-12-2023**

Abstract

This paper examines the quest for home and belonging of Palestinians and their descendants in various spatialities and the issue of in-between-ness as it is depicted in Susan Abulhawa's *The Blue Between Sky and Water* (2015). Via adopting a geocritical spatial theoretical framework, this article sheds light on how Arab-Americans, namely Palestinian immigrants, realize their identity in diaspora and manage to establish their unique homes despite the senses of non-belonging and homelessness. The paper investigates some of the novel's characters, particularly Nur, and her journey of self-discovery and belonging. In the novel, Nur is relentlessly out of place as she is caught between the binaries of the East and the West amidst a topophobic/philic reality. Thus, this paper illustrates how Abulhawa displays the struggle of finding home and belonging for Palestinians and their offspring outside of the homeland.

Keywords: Arab-Americans, Belonging, Diaspora, Homelessness, Topophobia/philia

1. Introduction

For Arab-American women writers, depicting the struggles and the hardships of living between two opposing worlds is a real challenge. The craft of penning novels that tackle national and cultural themes is threatened by falling into the trap of bias and stereotyping, especially with regards to the targeted audience. In his book *Arab American Literary Fictions, Cultures, and Politics* (2007), Steven Salaita elaborates on this idea of the risk of bias and stereotypes and adds to it his comparison of the author's intent vs. the novel's effect (106). He illustrates how the American audience's expectations of Arabs that is based on their Orientalist beliefs, may interfere with the author's intention in writing their literary work and results in "hoaxes" (Salaita 2007, 101).

As an Arab-American female writer, Abulhawa manages to refrain from such biases when she portrays the Palestinian struggle of finding home and belonging in her novel *The Blue Between Sky and Water* (2015). The story follows the lives of the Baraka family of Beit Daras who goes through dispossession and displacement because of the Nakba of 1948. Abulhawa opens her novel with the ordinary everyday life of the three siblings; Nazmiyeh, Mamdouh and Meriem that was soon disrupted by the coming of the Israeli colonizer. Meriem is killed by the Israeli forces, Mamdouh receives a bullet that

* Doi: https://doi.org/ 10.47012/jjmll. 17.1.14
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stops the growth of one of his legs, and Nazmiyeh is gang-raped when she tries to rescue her sister. The novel moves on to describe the struggle of living in the overcrowded camps in Gaza and the destiny of the Baraka family with Mamdouh's moving to America. Nur, the granddaughter of Nazmiyeh's brother Mamdouh is the main character of the novel and the one who suffers the most from homelessness and the feeling of non-belonging.

Significantly, the novel was examined from various perspectives since its publication. In his article "The Palestinian Diaspora and the Voice of Resistance in Susan Abulhawa's *The Blue Between Sky and Water"* (2019), Yousif Modaghesh analyses the novel with a special focus on its temporal dimension without referring to its spatial dimension. He also focuses on the feminist voice of resistance and how Abulhawa keeps the hope of returning to Palestine alive despite all the hardships. In a similar vein, Hiba Nabiha A and Dr Abdul Latheef V's work "Existence is Resistance: Palestinian Resistance in Susan Abulhawa's *The Blue Between Sky and Water*" (2022) examines the life struggle in the camps and how the Baraka family resisted the occupation through challenging the harsh life in Gaza camps.

Whereas the above researchers focused on life in Palestine, Noman (2022) highlights the diasporic dimension of Abulhawa's writing particularly what relates to the psychological aspect of traumatic experiences and resistance through narrative in his article "Endless Agony and Death in Diaspora: A Study of Abulhawa's *The Blue Between Sky And Water*". Through adopting a psychoanalytical approach to analysing the novel, Nashef's paper "Suppressed Nakba Memories in Palestinian female narratives: Susan Abulhawa's *The Blue Between Sky and Water* and Radwa Ashour's *Interventions"* (2021) addresses the issue of female silencing and how Abulhawa voiced the struggle of women who endured rape during the Nakba. Nashef praises Abulhawa for voicing out the pain of those women who felt shame and were silenced by society. In addition, in their article "A Shattered World: Susan Abulhawa's Appropriation of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* in *The Blue Between Sky and Water*" (2021), Alkayid, Kitishat, and Al Kayed argue that Abulhawa was influenced by Morrison's narrative in writing her novel. They particularly focus on the character of Nur and the details of her life and compare it to Pecola from Morrison's work alongside the significance of the colour blue in both novels.

Nonetheless, none of the studies mentioned above openly discuss or focus on how spatiality affects the conceptualization of home, identity and belonging as they are manifested in Abulhawa's novel. That is why this paper aims at addressing this gap in the literature via focusing on how space shapes and alters the sense of homeliness and belongingness for Palestinians and their offspring. The present study sheds light on the challenge of living between two opposing worlds. It highlights the liminal position of Palestinian-American women who dwell in the in-between. The study seeks to examine the diasporic representation of Palestinian-American women as it is evoked by Abulhawa, to show how spatial reality affects the notions of home, belonging, and identity for this ethnic minority.

The concepts of topophilia and topophobia are deployed to dissect this diasporic reality. These two concepts are generated from the discipline of geography and they serve the purpose of the present geocritical analysis of Nur's spatiality. In Yi-Fu Tuan's *Topophilia A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values* (1974), the concept of topophilia is introduced as "the affective bond between

people and place or setting" (4). The concept can be explained literally to denote the love of place. It is about developing those positive emotions, which are associated with a given spatiality. If one's home is characterized by love, warmth and security, one is most likely to develop a situation of topophilia. Topophobia is analysed by Dylan Trigg as the antithesis of topophilia. From its name, it is clear that there is a negative extreme fear that is associated with a certain space or place. Trigg (2017) argues that "the concept remains ambiguous enough to include an entire spectrum of relations a person might have with place, including both the anxiety of being exposed, or enclosed" (xxi).

The main objective of the present article is to examine and discuss the state of Nur as an illustration of Palestinian-American women who are constantly out of place and unable to belong to a given place. The article engages the character of Nur as represented in Abulhawa's novel. The focal argument is summarized in the journey of Nur who initially lacks a defined place in the world and struggles with belonging until she makes up her own home and settles in Palestine. This paper adopts a geocritical approach and evolves within a theoretical framework that is embedded in spatiality. It focuses on how space shapes the living reality of the character of Nur. It illustrates how her spatial existence and environment affects her self-realization and perception of the world.

As such, Robert Tally's theory of spatiality as well as Edward Soja's concept of thirdspace are deployed in the analysis to illuminate how the spatial experience of individuals is as important as the social and the historical one. Geocriticism as a literary approach used in my analysis of Abulhawa's novel is used "to ask new questions, to read differently, to engage with other disciplinary methods, and to interpret the ways that we make sense of our own spaces, of our own maps" (Tally 2011, 8). In this regard, geocriticism helps in determining how the spatial experience of different characters reflects and influences both their sense of belonging and the way they identify with and make up their homes. In *Topophrenia Place, Narrative, and the Spatial Imagination* (2019), Tally contends that "geocriticism provided a way of reading literature with a heightened sensitivity to spatial relations, as well as to place and to mapping" (57). That is what this paper aims at in analyzing the spatiality of Nur and how it has affected her identity and belonging. Since Nur's spatial reality is tainted by in-between-ness, geocriticism is the best method to analyse her spatiality. As Tally (2019) puts it, "geocritical theory seems well suited to addressing the cartographical anxiety of life 'in the middest'" (74).

2. Thinking about home and belonging

The concept of home does not have one unified fixed definition. Its meaning shifts with the angle from which it is being observed. According to Dara Downey, Ian Kinane, and Elizabeth Parker (2018) "home is a concept that is central to how people define themselves, whether it is linked to individual identity, family identity, cultural identity, or national identity" (73). In other words, this definition suggests an abstract quality of home that relates to feelings and affiliations. Following this definition, Home is not essentially the house in which one lives, as it can be a mere feeling or a mental realization. The common saying of "it feels like home here" and "home is where the heart is" are two examples of how humans' realizations and understanding of home can vary.

Similarly, Roberta Rubenstein (2001) views home as "not merely a physical structure or a

geographical location but always an emotional space" (1). This definition highlights the point of emotions associated to a given space to turn it into a meaningful home. Home may be a space that is firstly turned into a place by adding meaning to it. Place, in return, develops to become a home when feelings of belonging and attachment are developed and linked to it. Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling (2006) add another layer to the definition of home and they highlight the fact that "home does not simply exist, but is made" (23). Here they are suggesting the process of homemaking that challenges the view that homes are predisposed. Home is made through "a process of creating and understanding forms of dwelling and belonging" in which "both material and imaginative elements" merge to "create" a sense of home that relates to "social and emotional relationships" (Blunt and Dowling 2006, 23). To Douglas Porteous and Sandra Smith (2001), home is "also a point of departure, a sense of autonomy" and "a place filled with memories" (31). In the case of Palestinians, Palestine as the homeland is their place of departure and the ultimate source of their memories. In that sense, "home creates and supports identity, provides shelter, gives privacy and security, and is the predominant centre of our lives" (Porteous and Smith 2001, 31). We argue that the definition of home is a mesh up of all the mentioned definitions. To put it differently, home is both a mental image and a concrete dwelling that shelters humans and affects their sense of belonging and rootedness.

The concepts of home and belonging go hand in hand since they comprise a reciprocal relationship in that the existence of one requires the presence of the other. Margarethe Kusenbach and Krista E Paulsen (2013) argue that "home can refer to different scales of place, ranging from an armchair to a state, and therefore may include locations of vastly different sizes" (3). To illustrate, in the case of Nur, home can be the house of the Baraka family in Gaza; it can also refer to Palestine as a whole, or it can be the limited space of her belly with her being pregnant. Belonging is culminated in the sensation of being part of the whole whether it be part of a social, a religious, or an ethnic group. Humans do not share the same sense of belonging. Alexandra J. Cutcher (2015) asserts that "because belonging is a deeply psychological construct, value and perception are both crucial – instructive reflections are an integral part of any definition of belonging" (221). In the case of Nur, as she is born and raised in the United States, her psychological construct of belonging should have been that which aligns with the sentiment of being a proud American citizen.

However, Nur is also Palestinian; she has the Arab heritage within her. Having both cultures made it difficult for Nur to realize her sense of belonging with one culture at the expense of the other. This liminal situation is a common reality for many Arab-Americans. As Najla Said (2014) puts it, "I wondered why I was an exception to the rule of what both Arabs and Americans were supposed to be like, and why I was stuck in such an uneasy position" (7). The state of in-between-ness that characterizes the reality of Nur and other Palestinian-Americans is what Salman H. Abu Sitta (2017) metaphorically calls "a life of Schizophrenia" (216). To illustrate, after moving to Gaza for the first time, Nur had to "unlearn the American assumptions she came with" regarding how to live and how to behave as a woman (Abulhawa 2015, 186). It is true that she is Palestinian by heritage but she has lived her life in America exposed to their Western lifestyle. Nur's experience is used by Abulhawa to showcase the struggle of countless

Palestinian American women when they have their first trip to Palestine. A living example is Said's (2014) explaining how "going to Palestine knowing you are one of 'them' but looking, sounding, and acting like one of 'us' was just confusing" (86). However, instead of dwelling in this confusion, she chose to let go of the idea "to have one identity, one way to describe" herself (Said 2014, 7). Nur's Schizophrenic experience is metaphorical too denoting a sense of having half identities in different spatialities.

Homemaking and belonging are essential features in the lives of people. Evidently, as social beings "our principal sense of belonging relies upon the culture in which we grow up, that in which we are first socialized"; yet, permanent stability in terms of having one defined culture is not always an option (Cutcher 2015, 222). In the novel, the space of Nur, at the start of her story, is not emotionally and socially secure for her, particularly after her grandfather Mamdouh passes away. Her indifferent mother does not tend to her physical and psychological needs (Abulhawa 2015, 75). What is even worse is her stepfather's sexual harassment that damaged Nur as a child; leaving her vulnerable both physically and mentally (Abulhawa 2015, 88). As such, constant movement and displacement are what marks her life up until her final settlement in Gaza (still the reader is not quite sure if Nur will stay permanently in Gaza).

Drawing on the experience of Chinese diaspora in Australia, Eng Khun, Kuah Pearce, and Andrew P. Davidson (2008) state that "in the end, home and feelings of belonging are more a thing of relationships than physicality or territory" (20). Identical to Nur's experience, the sense of home and belonging establishes itself amidst the warmth of the human relationship rather than a given space or place. Nur feels home with Nazmiyeh and the rest of the Baraka family after moving to Gaza (Abulhawa 2015, 237). It is true that she suffered greatly in various foster homes and especially when she temporarily lived with her mother, but Nur could feel home and belonging because of her family (the Barakas) in Palestine.

3. Lacking a defined place and living between the binaries

In *The Blue Between Sky and Water*, Nur is a Palestinian American girl that can neither feel fully Palestinian nor fully American. She was born in the United States from a Palestinian father and a "Castillian" mother "from Madrid" (Abulhawa 2015, 67). Her father holds a mitigated feeling towards his own Arab identity for he views it as an "unfortunate heritage" (Abulhawa 2015, 67). He feels the need to suppress and conceal it from the others. No wonder how both parents have tried to give their baby a name that would not expose her Arab background, as they hated "calling their child by a name that reminded them both of what they'd prefer not to remember" (Abulhawa 2015, 67). It is because of this lack of regard to the Arab lineage by Nur's parents that her grandfather feared its dreadful effects on her self-realization and identity, particularly after her father died in a car accident and she was left with her mother. Intrinsically, Mamdouh considered it his duty to take care of Nur and preserve who she was as a Palestinian.

Unlike children who receive an abundance of maternal affection, Nur does not receive this essential warmth from her biological mother. In fact, the latter was never inclined to have Nur live with her. Mamdouh knew this and he spent a lot of money to convince her to let Nur live with him (Abulhawa 2015, 68). However, after Mamdouh passed away, Nur's mom was called forth to take care of her

daughter since she had no one left now. Abulhawa (2015) highlights how Nur's mother's real motif was having "a trust fund from a large insurance policy" that became now Nur's money (74). Abulhawa stresses this aspect of the lack of maternal love and acceptance, and how it affects the building of Nur's character and personality. Nur was constantly looking for a "proof" (Abulhawa 2015, 74) of her mom's love. All that Nur's mom cared about was money. Nur knew that the only way to keep receiving this shallow affection from her mother is through behaving well and "working hard to be worthy" of her mother's love (Abulhawa 2015, 75). This is particularly accurate when Nur discovered that she is pregnant. She did not feel that she can take care of this child just the way her mother failed to take care of her.

Not being accepted by her own mother, Nur believes that she can never become a mother herself. According to Gina Mireault (2002) "early nurturing, in which mothers are typically pivotal, is crucial to a child's healthy emotional, social, and cognitive development" (287). Nur lacked this maternal affection. She did not even have a parental connection with her father since he passed away when she was a baby, in a "car accident" (Abulhawa 2015, 66). According to Santiago Mendo-Lázaro, Benito León-del-Barco, María-Isabel Polo-del-Río, Rocío Yuste-Tosina, and Víctor-María López-Ramos (2019) the "lack of affection and communication, strict norms, and a negative view of children" results in "negative effects in the personal and socio-emotional development" of the child (2). Nur was affected by this matter. Surprisingly, when she discovers that she is pregnant, Nur does not give up on her child. Despite all the odds, Nur chooses to become the best mother for her child.

The only solace Nur had in her childhood is when she lived with her grandfather Mamdouh, as he was her "Favourite Person Ever, and The Best" (Abulhawa 2015, 70). Nur enjoyed the company of her Palestinian grandfather who first created and then enlivened the picture of Palestine and the land of her ancestors within her. Her grandfather was the "string that connected all the pieces of her" (Abulhawa 2015, 72). Her grandfather represented Palestine and the Arab world for her. He taught her some Arabic words and he introduced her from an early age to the Arab world and to Islam. She used to "perform salat together" with her grandfather who taught her what it means to be a Muslim (Abulhawa 2015, 68). Her grandfather used storytelling to connect her to Palestine. Stories "about individual or group experiences focus on examining experiences and have significant implications for the ongoing shaping of identity of those who tell and those who listen" (Huisman 2014, 145). The stories about Palestine helped Nur learn about her Palestinian identity but it has also helped Mamdouh keep Palestine alive within him. Mamdouh reminded Nur that "stories matter. We are composed of our stories. The human heart is made of the words we put in it" (Abulhawa 2015, 64). However, Nur's connection with her Palestinian half did not last long with Mamdouh passing away and Nur losing her only string that kept her connected to her ancestral land.

Another remarkable aspect used by Abulhawa to connect Nur to Palestine is the use of magical realism. Just like Mamdouh's sister Mariam who had "mismatched" coloured eyes and who could see feelings in the form of lights and colours, Nur's mismatched eyes enabled her to see her grandfather's emotions too (Abulhawa 2015, 73). However, shortly before the death of her grandfather, Nur started losing the ability to see colours, as if to signal the disruption of her connection to Palestine (Abulhawa

2015, 69). Nur would also see dreams in which a boy named Khaled talks to her in Arabic and teaches her about Palestine (Abulhawa 2015, 87). When Nur becomes a psychotherapist, Khaled, Nazmiyeh's grandson, is the main reason that brings her back to Palestine to treat him (Abulhawa 2015, 144). As such, despite losing her grandfather and his stories of Palestine, Nur finds her way back to the homeland.

Edward Said (2014) famously speaks about the "overriding sensation of always being out of place" that characterized his life as well as many Arab-Americans (18). In Abulhawa's novel, the Baraka family are but one example of what it means to be out of place. As they were forced out of their native village of Beit Daras. The Baraka family found themselves seeking refuge in the overcrowded Nusseirat camp in the Gaza Strip (Abulhawa 2015, 46). Abulhawa (2015) especially highlights the initial situation, after the evacuation, of women who found themselves "burdened by shock, mud, and humiliation" as they were "waiting for someone to do something, waiting to go home to Beit Daras" (47). In the novel, with the beginning of her journey, Nur cannot find a place to call home and is ceaselessly out of place too.

For those individuals who lack a rooted sense of belonging and who are mostly out of place, seeking to excel in the intellectual domain becomes the purpose of their existence. Said (2014) illuminates the latter when he addresses his own experience as someone "who was never at home" and who was "out of place in nearly every way" (266). According to Said (2014), his special makeup as a Palestinian American who lived in different places yet was constantly out of place is what gave him "the incentive to find (his) territory, not socially but intellectually" (266). In the novel, Nur found "her territory" in excelling in her studies and working hard. As Abulhawa (2015) puts it, Nur "had found a way to shine, a space where she could feel love and admiration, if she worked for it. And so she worked and studied as much as she could" (75).

Abulhawa uses Nur to echo the experience of many Arab-Americans in the US who are treated like "the other". According to El-Aswad (2013), "there is no box for Arab-Americans in the ethnicity section as there is for Asians or Hispanics" (266). This fact highlights the racial visible invisibility of such minority who find themselves unable to belong easily. Abulhawa (2015) expresses Nur's liminality and non-belonging when she declares that "there was no place for her in the world to be" (91). The feeling of having two contradictory identities pushing and pulling is not a comfortable sensation. According to Downey et.al (2018), "one cannot occupy an in-between space or exist (in-) between two binary states without a resultant tension and/or mobility between both elements of the binary" (6). The situation of in-between-ness naturally calls for some sort of bewilderment.

The spatial existential reality in which Nur was brought up adds much trouble to her realization of the right way to act and what is deemed as the proper behaviour. It is true that her grandfather tried his best to secure a healthy home for his granddaughter and to keep her attached to Palestine, yet after he passed away Nur was left at the mercy of her indifferent mother, her abusive stepfather, and a bunch of foster homes to erase what is left of her Arab heritage. Her exposure to the Arab-Palestinian culture ended with the death of her grandfather. However, Nur does not fully desert her Palestinian identity and with the first chance to visit Palestine, she does not think twice and she resolves to move to Gaza to treat Khaled (Abulhawa 2015, 148).

Throughout the story, Nur constantly moves from place to place and with each movement, she develops another layer of homelessness. After her grandfather's death, Nur moves to "six temporary foster houses and six different schools over the course of two years" (Abulhawa 2015, 90). It is natural that she cannot find a place of homeliness with all of the moving and changing of places. Even when Nur finally finds "a permanent space… at a Southern Baptist children's home in Thomasville, North Carolina" she still does not feel at ease as the only Muslim girl in a Christian foster home (Abulhawa 2015, 90). Abulhawa (2015) highlights the matter of Nur's struggle to keep her Muslim identity when she "was baptized" at "Chapel Service" to end the unjust punishment she was receiving as the only Muslim girl among a Christian majority (206). Nur did not want to change her religion. So, "in private" when no one noticed her, she "worried for her soul and prayed to Allah" (Abulhawa 2015, 206).

In America, Nur lives somewhere between the East and the West and she cannot manage to find where she truly belongs. Her life evolves between the binaries of two different and opposing worlds. It is true that she grew up in America in various foster homes and even in a church, but her longing to her Palestinian lineage is always part of her. Nur, at this stage, is out of place. As Paul Basu (2018) contends "to be out of place, however, implies something different: it has connotations of rupture" that does not solely affect one's "past place, but has also left one without place in the present" (53). This is why Nur was eager to go back to her grandfather's homeland in hope of finding her real home.

4. Nur's diasporic reality: between topophobia and topophilia

A salient feature in Nur's story is her constant journeys throughout different places; from the United States to Gaza, then to Egypt, and back to Gaza again. Nur is the example used by Abulhawa to describe the life of the Arab Palestinian diaspora in the United States. The word diaspora embodies a notion of a centre, a locus, a 'home' from where the dispersion occurs" (Brah 1996, 178). In the case of Palestinians, this locus of dispersion is Palestine. According to Virinder S. Kalra, Raminder Kaur, and John Hutnyk (2005), "The classical form of diaspora, then, relates to forced movement, exile and a consequent sense of loss derived from the inability to return" (10). In the novel, the Baraka family are expelled from their village of Beit Daras and forced to the camps in Gaza. Mamdouh moves to Egypt and Kuwait for work and eventually moves to America where he lives with Nur until he passes away (Abulhawa 2015, 50-57).

Palestinians are denied the right to return to their homeland. As Ilan Pappe (2017) illustrates "the planting of TNT in the rubble to prevent any of the expelled inhabitants from returning" (9) is a clear indication of the ongoing domicide. Domicide refers to "deliberate destruction of home against the will of the home dweller" (Porteous and Smith 2001, 3). Palestinians are facing an ongoing domicide since 1948 in which they are forced to move out of their lands and live in a state of exile in various parts of the world, with the dark reality of never returning to Palestine. According to Pappe (2017), "more than half of Palestine's native population, close to 800,000 people, had been uprooted" in 1948 (xiii). Most of these Palestinians sought refuge in the overcrowded camps, while others became refugees in neighbouring countries as well as western countries. As such, diaspora may hold a negative connotation to those who live within it. However, "despite the uprootings and dislocations experienced by those within the

diaspora" the "diasporic space has also emerged as a site of creative energy" and Abulhawa's work is but one example (Ball 2017, 131).

In other usages, diaspora is used to refer to the Jewish experience of being scattered all over the world instead of residing in their holy, promised land according to their traditions. The irony is that in contemporary times, diaspora is the state of the Palestinians who are forced out of their lands by Zionist project. In the novel, Nazmiyeh was worried that "*rather than returning and regrouping, family were leaving and dispersing. She thought Palestine was scattering farther away at the same time that Israel was moving closer"* (Abulhawa 2015, 57). Kim Knott and Seán McLouglin (2010) argue that "since the 1960s, with increasing transnational and global migrant movements, 'diaspora' was employed to denote a national, cultural, or religious group living in a foreign land" (22). In Mamdouh's case, the national aspect of his diaspora is the most salient as a Palestinian who proudly identified as such. Ato Quayson and Girish Daswani (2013) argue that in order for a diaspora to emerge, a number of conditions are expected;

> these often include the time-depth of dispersal and settlement in other locations; the development of a myth of the homeland; the attendant diversification of responses to homeland and host nation; the evolution of class segmentation and conflict within a given diaspora alongside the concomitant evolution of an elite group of cultural and political brokers; and the ways in which contradictions among the various class segments end up reinforcing different forms of material and emotional investment in an imaginary ideal of the homeland. (3)

In the case of the Palestinian diaspora as represented in the novel, all of the mentioned conditions are present, as the ideal of homeland mashes up to result in a desire of a return to the homeland even if life in the diaspora is promising. Mamdouh exemplifies the latter when his "*exile in America offered* (him) *a professional career and financial gains… that he could have only dreamed about anywhere else*" (Abulhawa 2015, 66). However, his exile also cost him his family and belonging. His diasporic life left him lonely and worried in his last days about the fate of his granddaughter Nur (Abulhawa 2015, 89).

Arab-Americans, as a diasporic group, experienced a myriad of unjust treatments especially what is embedded in the established prejudices against Arabs and Muslims as fanatics and terrorists. Abulhawa highlights Nur's hyper visible Muslim identity at Mills Home where everyone where Christian and how she was bullied because of her faith until she gave her consent to be baptized (Abulhawa 2015, 206). This unshaken picture of evil Muslims and Arabs is well grounded in the Western world and is reinforced with the media that depicts "the Arab as villain", which becomes "a favourite scapegoat of popular American culture" (Saeb 2020, 98). The stereotype of Arabs and Muslims as bad people who only bring harm to the land of freedom increased dramatically after 9/11. Some of the well-known stereotypes "of Arabs include: backwards or uneducated immigrants, Muslim fundamentalists or terrorists, violent and barbaric, sexual perverts, rich sheiks, or victimized, subservient sexual objects" for women (Weaver 2010, 51).

Second-wave immigrants marked the coming of huge numbers of Palestinians who were fleeing what Gregory Orfalea (2006) calls "The Palestinian Debacle" that is commonly known as "Al-Nekba" (the catastrophe). This event marks the Baraka family's first dispossession and forceful movement to

Gaza. As Carol Fadda-Conrey (2014) contends, "the second wave of immigration started with the end of World War II in 1945 and lasted till 1967" (12). What is special about this wave is the fact that it "contained a significant number of Muslims" who were "educated, skilled professionals" that "staunchly identified themselves as Arabs" (Ludescher 2006, 94). Nur's grandfather, Mamdouh, is one of the Second-wavers. Israel drove out Palestinians out of their homes and lands. The Zionists moved them to overcrowded camps in which life was unbearable. Many Palestinians were obliged to migrate to other parts of the world.

In Nur's diasporic being, the home is Palestine, yet she knows about it only through her grandfather's scattered accounts (Abulhawa 2015, 64). He told her about their life before the coming of the colonizer in "Beit Daras" and how he was shot in his leg's "growing plate" (Abulhawa 2015b, 62). He resolved to highlight for Nur the importance of their people's stories. As Devika Chawla and Amardo Rodriguez (2011) put it "a people without stories are a people without a history. They are a people who could very well be obliterated from the earth because their stories are invisible and unheard" (16). This perfectly explains Abulhawa's insistence upon preserving the Palestinian story through her writings. During her childhood when Nur lived with her grandfather, they have decided to write "a love story" with all her "favourite things they did together" and titled it "*Jiddo* and *Me*" (Abulhawa 2015, 68). However, after her grandfather passes away, the book gets lost with her ceaseless movements from place to place; signalling Nur's losing her narrative of Palestine at this stage. When Nur finds out the truth about her being part of the Baraka family in Gaza, she also finds her book with the things that belonged to Mamdouh handed down to her by Nazmiyeh (Abulhawa 2015, 172). Nur finding her book at last suggests her reconnection to her Palestinian identity once again.

In the novel, and before the psychiatric position in Gaza, Nur has never been to Palestine. Her grandfather's stories work as mental maps that help her imagine Palestine the way her ancestors perceived it. Tally (2013) points out how "literature also functions as a form of mapping, offering its readers descriptions of places, situating them in a kind of imaginary space, and providing points of reference by which they can orient themselves" (2). In the case of Nur, the stories she hears from her grandfather represent the literature that maps the real places in Palestine by situating them in an imaginary space in which Nur manages to identify with and link it to her Palestinian heritage.

Before her travels, Nur developed some kind of topophobia especially when she lived in those uncomfortable places. Topophobia in this context can be defined as "an 'enclosure' for places of conflict," with "home as a prison" (Gonzalez 2005, 195). This is especially true with Nur's living with her mean mother and abusive stepfather, and later on in the foster houses and the Southern Baptist children's home; Mills Home. These places did not help Nur attach positive meaning to them to truly feel home in them. Instead, fear, abuse, and pain were the dominant characteristics of those places. This led Nur to develop a fear of place and anxiety attached to these spatialities. As an example, Nur's memory of her living with her mother is tainted with her mother's cruelty and neglect, and the hard experience of sexual abuse by her own stepfather, at the age of nine (Abulhawa 2015, 87). Sam, her stepfather, used to abuse her sexually in her own bedroom in her mother's house (Abulhawa 2015, 78). A mother's house as a

space is supposed to be the safest place for a child to live in. However, for Nur, it is a painful, unpleasant space that affected her deeply later on in her life especially when dealing with reciprocal emotions such as love and trust. In this respect, Nur's mother's house is a topophobic place for Nur.

Another topophobic place for Nur is Mills Home in which she goes through another level of discomfort and loss. Nur is the only Muslim girl in a Christian Foster Home. At first, the new housemother assured her that they "love and accept everybody here", but later on they urged her to convert to Christianity (Abulhawa 2015, 92). Nur felt even more devastated while residing in Mills Home. When she meets Nzinga on one occasion, she reveals how she feels broken "like there's nothing holding (her) together" (Abulhawa 2015, 93). Those places, which ought to provide a home for Nur, were more like a prison for her; a suffocating place for torture where she could not feel at ease. It was only after she graduated school and finished college and became independent that she got rid of such sensation and control (Abulhawa 2015, 143).

Conversely, Nur developed topophilia for some places during her travels, particularly in Gaza and the house of her relatives. Trigg (2017) defines topophilia as "a love of the home as an emblem of human warmth" (20). Nur found warmth and love among the Baraka family in Gaza. Later on, she would find out that it was in fact her real family (Abulhawa 2015, 171). When she went to Gaza as a psychotherapist to treat the case of Khaled Baraka, a young boy who is having a unique case of Locked-in syndrome, Nur discovered that Khaled is no stranger kid but her own relative and that she finally found the home of her grandfather. The atmosphere was mixed with tears and laughter and Nazmiyeh's joy for finding their Nur; her brother's granddaughter (Abulhawa 2015, 171). Nur was overwhelmed by the amount of love she received inside the house of the Baraka family when "the rest of the family and all the sisters-in-law came" to meet Mamdouh's granddaughter (Abulhawa 2015, 173). Nur found relief as "life had collected her pieces and returned her to love's source" (Abulhawa 2015, 173). The places in which Nur has lived before are nothing like the house of the Baraka family in Gaza. For the first time in her life after her grandfather's passing away, Nur finds a place that she is ready to call home, a place where she can love and be loved unconditionally (Abulhawa 2015, 237).

Nevertheless, Nur finds some difficulty in adjusting her life in occupied Gaza. She has spent all her life before her coming to Palestine in America where life is completely different than in Gaza. The real difference resides in the cultural aspect of being Arab and American. For the Baraka family, Nur was too American in her behaviour and personality to abide by their strict Arab cultural conventions. When it came to relationships and her ideas of romantic love, Nur learned how to love following the American conventions of individuality and freedom. She did not learn Arab etiquettes in building relationships and maintaining them. Because of that, Nazmiyeh and her daughter Alwan urged Nur to change her ways since she is among Arabs now that she needs to honour her family and act as an Arab too (Abulhawa 2015, 195). They did not blame her for her American identity that contradicted with their Arab culture and beliefs, but they highlighted for her the importance of following their Palestinian culture and conduct (Abulhawa 2015, 196).

For the first time in her life, Nur is faced with what it means to be half-Palestinian and half-American. Her identity, that is the most shattered of them all, is brought under question as she comes to

live in the Arab world. In the beginning of her journey, Nur "was planted nowhere. She was raw and utterly lost" (Abulhawa 2015, 191). Abulhawa invokes the shattered, fragile nature of Nur that is the result of the merging of her spatial and cultural upbringing and her life amidst the chaos of the Arab and the American ideals. The "devastating loneliness" that marked Nur's life in the US made her unable to know her limits. When Dr Musmar showed an interest in her she gave him her heart willingly (Abulhawa 2015, 191).

It comes as no surprise that Nur feels both a sense of belonging as well as a sense of betrayal because of her relationship with Dr Musmar. For the first time in her life after the death of her beloved grandfather, Nur believes that she has found a man who loves her for who she is. The sensation drives Nur to denounce all hinders and seek to pursue her quest for belonging and affection. His initial kind nature puts Nur at ease and leads her to blindly trust him in regard of her life and body. However, Dr Musmar is a married man, who is obviously controlled by his wife (Abulhawa 2015, 166), and who treats Nur as his mistress. Dr Musmar did not dare to face his wife with his alleged love to Nur. Instead he kept meeting Nur in secret; first "by the sea" (Abulhawa 2015, 188) and later on "in a secret apartment he had arranged" (Abulhawa 2015, 199).

When things were intensified with his wife discovering his affair, and when he regained his senses after recovering his fling, Dr Musmar resolved to break all ties with Nur and further moved permanently to Canada with his family. This unexpected event broke Nur's heart. She was betrayed by the man who, even for a brief period of time, made her feel that she belonged to someone. Amidst a mixed sense of belonging and betrayal, Nur decided to take charge of her life and to make her own place in the world. Throughout her journey, Nur sought to free herself from all the pains that shackled her and denied her the right to belong. As Abulhawa (2015) puts it referring to all Palestinians;

> Our prison was not being allowed to see or do, and our escape was to find ways to taste the rest of the world. Nur was allowed to move as we couldn't. But rather than taking in all there was, she went everywhere trying to empty herself, because her prison lived within her, and the escape she longed for meant disrobing herself of her skin. Until love was planted in her belly and began to grow there. (232)

Eventually, Nur decided to embrace the child growing inside of her (Abulhawa 2015, 227). For some Americans, Nur's child is called the seed of love; for some Palestinians her child is the proof of sin, but for Nur her child is now her home. It is also apparent that Nur is engaged in an act of transgression of expectations. Her pregnancy out of wedlock is a clear transgression of the Muslim Palestinian social expectations of young unmarried women. Insisting on keeping the baby and not aborting it out of fear of dishonouring the Braka family is her second act of transgression. However, she was not left alone to decide amidst her confusion. Nazmiyeh, Alwan, and even Nzinga (the social worker and her friend) supported her and they encouraged her to have this baby (Abulhawa 2015, 222).

The Palestinian social space of Nur dictates on her a series of expectations that are rooted to the place itself, one where any divergence is regarded as a transgression. As Tim Cresswell (1996) puts it: "place is produced by practice that adheres to (ideological) beliefs about what is the appropriate thing to

do" (16). Palestine as a place prescribes certain rules and expectations from its dwellers, and in the case of Nur, those expectations as the appropriate norms are not met. This results in a frustration directed towards the transgressor (Nur), by the Palestinian society and a look of disdain to whomever chooses to approve on such act.

However, places are not fixed but are constantly evolving. In her ground-breaking book *For Space* (2005), Doreen Massey acknowledges that "we recognise space as always under construction…it is never finished; never closed" (22). As such, it is possible to alter it. In fact, the human interference in such construction and modification is inevitable because of the active agency of people across space and place. In the same token, place "change(s) us, not through some visceral belonging" but "through the practicing of place, the negotiation of intersecting trajectories" where "negotiation is forced upon us" (Massey 2005, 204). In Abulhawa's novel, Nur's space and place in Gaza changes her just the way she changes it; not simply because she finds her sense of belonging, but because she manages to alter it and negotiate via her transgression the taken-for-granted politics of place that characterize life in Gaza. Of course, she is aided by a female support system that enables her to attain that.

5. Nur's quest: making a home of her own

It is remarkable how the character of Nur succeeds in turning a mere space into her own place through attaching meaning to it. According to Cresswell (2015), Space "has been seen in distinction to place as a realm without meaning" (10). Thus, when Nur adds meaning to her space in Palestine, she transforms it into a place of belonging. Nur finds in her new place familial affection, respect and support. She genuinely feels the possibility of claiming a place among the Braka family in which she becomes an integral part. Part of the reason why she finally realizes that is because she finds respect and support with them even after her transgression of social expectations and her pregnancy out of wedlock. In addition, the assurance that she receives when being among them comforts her and drives her to fully embrace her Palestinian identity.

In her work *Gender, Identity, and Place Understanding Feminist Geographies* (1999), Linda McDowell illustrates the different meanings associated to spaces and places and their unfixed nature. She argues that "there is, in other words, a spatial politics to uncovering the ways in which identities and places are being transformed and reconnected, positioning people within new patterns, or geometries, of inclusion and exclusion" (McDowell 1999, 214). Nur discovers her other half of being Palestinian because of her movement in space and because of her new place with the Barakas. In Gaza, she is positioned at the centre of the Baraka family; as an integral part of the whole, and this in turn enables her to feel included in such a space. According to McDowell (1999), "the 'in-between' is itself a process or a dynamic, not just a stage on the way to a more final identity" (215). Certainly, Nur's American identity is not erased or denied at this stage. Instead, her in-between identity blooms in this context as she comes to realize the missing pieces of her past.

Undoubtedly, people's constant search for home and one's place of belonging affects their self-realization and identity. In *Space, Place, and Gender* (1994), Massey asserts that "whether longed for or feared (or both), place is interpreted as being important in the search for identity in this supposedly

troubled era of time-space compression" (10). Her statement brings forth the concepts of topophilia and topophobia respectively. When one longs for a place and attaches positive emotions to it, in that case topophilia prevails. In contrast, a place that is feared and loathed is more likely to install topophobic sentiments in the subject that occupies it. As it is the case of Nur, topophobia and topophilia characterized her mobility and spatial reality.

Throughout her journey and quest for home, Nur transcends into the realm of the thirdspace in which she aims at embracing both her Palestinian and American identities. Nur's firstspace is her materialistic physical space of America where she spent her life before moving to Palestine. Her secondspace is about her abstract mental realization of her Palestinian homeland. Her thirdspace is the appropriation of both the abstract and the concrete realizations of space and an expansion of both that was aided by her actual movement to Palestine. To illustrate, Soja (2014) describes thirdspace as "a product of a 'thirding' of the spatial imagination, the creation of another mode of thinking about space that draws upon the material and mental spaces of the traditional dualism but extends well beyond them in scope, substance, and meaning" (11). This third alternative is some middle ground that helps in softening the rigid lines of the binaries by paving the way for a different way of thinking. The latter includes the sensitive state of having a hyphenated identity. In Nur's case it is her Arab and American identity that highlights the notion of in-between-ness.

Thirdspace goes beyond the fixity of dualism and binaries and opens up paths for in-between situations. In *Thirdspace Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real and Imagined Places* (1996), Soja illustrates how thirdspace is "a creative recombination and extension, one that builds on a Firstspace perspective that is focused on the 'real' material world and a Secondspace perspective that interprets this reality through 'imagined' representations of spatiality" (6). This combination and extension can include real and imagined as well as real-and-imagined spaces. In Abulhawa's novel, the blue between sky and water is a thirdspace; it can be considered a real-and-imagined space. The first time Abulhawa (2015) introduces the blue she describes it as a "quiet place without time" (11). This infers that the blue is an imagined space since it does not follow the conventions of the materialistic temporal world.

However, the blue also appears as a real space; "the river of Beit Daras" where Mariam met Khaled her "imaginary friend" who teaches her how "to write and read" (Abulhawa 2015, 14). Sometimes Abulhawa uses the blue to simply mean the sea or the ocean (51). But what is even more confusing about this space is how even Nur who was in America visited the blue in her dreams and met Mariam and Khaled who taught her Arabic and told her stories about Palestine (Abulhawa 2015, 87). As such, the blue also signifies a realm of souls; since Mariam is dead, Khaled is unconscious due to his locked-in syndrome, and Nur is asleep. They all meet in this space and share their Arab Palestinian heritage in the forms of conversation and stories. The blue, as a thirdspace, becomes what Soja (1996) calls a "real-and-imagined or realandimagined" place (11).

Initially, Nur does not seem to belong to a steady place that she could call home. As a teenager with a life of constant mobility, Nur felt lost and confused. In America, spatially and culturally, she was always out of place; unable to belong. Nur lacked a defined sense of identity and was unable to embrace

one place to call home. As Abulhawa (2015) puts it "Nur was always on the way", "she had no real anchors in the world, and so she was always on her way" (236). Nur finally goes back home. She goes back to Palestine. She finds a place to call home and feel belonging. The following passage perfectly illustrates her return to the Baraka family in Gaza:

> It was the first homecoming she had ever had. The first time she had returned to a place that embraced her. She had always been compelled to move away. To leave and hope the next place would be better. Her hand still on the centre of her world, Nur watched the room around her with joyful eyes. (Abulhawa 2015, 237)

Nur finds her place in the world with her decision of becoming a mother and living with her relatives in Gaza. Abulhawa leaves the reader with an open ending. She intentionally ends her novel with speculations about Nur's future with the Baraka family. Abulhawa also suggests that Nur's story does not end here with the end of the novel.

6. Conclusion

The Blue Between Sky and Water deploys the character of Nur as a hyphenated being who lacks both a defined home and a sense of belonging. Initially caught and trapped between the two juxtaposed spatial and cultural worlds of America and Palestine, Nur can feel neither fully American nor fully Palestinian. Her journeys from the United States to Gaza, then to Egypt, and finally back to Gaza affects her identity and leads her to create her own home out of all the contradictions of her existence. Nur, as a member of the Palestinian diaspora, experiences both topophobia and topophilia in the various spaces and places that she came to occupy in the course of her life. At first, she suffers from the fear of abandonment, enclosure, and imprisonment in her childhood with her indifferent mother and then the fear of exploitation from her abusive stepfather. Later on, Nur suffers from non-belonging in the various foster houses that she dwells in, especially at Mills Home. After her graduation as a psychotherapist, Nur moves to Palestine where she finds peace and warmth in the house of the Baraka family. Eventually, Nur finds her home in the aspiration of becoming a mother and living with her family in Gaza. She is no longer out of place as she came to develop a place of her own, out of all the contradictions of her upbringing. Nur discovers at the end of her journey that her home is within her; she carries it with her. She finds comfort in motherhood and caring for her Palestinian relatives, even if that meant living in a country torn with war. The spatial reality of individuals is highly important in shaping their sense of home, belonging and identity. Throughout this article, space and place are at the core of the Palestinian American experience exemplified in the case of Nur who was 'longing to belong' and who managed to step out of the liminal phase to find settlement and belonging.

شوق للانتماء: رحلة البحث عن الوطن في رواية سوزان أبوالهوى *الأزرق مابين السماء والماء* (2015)

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الملخص

يتناول هذا المقال موضوع البحث عن المأوى والانتماء للفلسطينيين وذريتهم في مختلف الأماكن، ومسألة البينيّة كما توضحها سوزان أبو الهوى في رواية الأزرق ما بين السماء والماء (2015)، من خلال اعتماد الإطار النظري المكاني الجيونقدي، ويلقي هذا المقال الضوء على كيفية إدراك الأمريكيين العرب، وتحديداً المهاجرين الفلسطينيين، لهويتهم في الشتات وتمكنهم من إنشاء مآويهم الفريدة على الرغم من مشاعر عدم الانتماء واللا-مأوى، ويتناول هذا البحث بعض شخصيات الرواية، ويركز تركيزاً خاصاً على نور، ورحلتها في اكتشاف الذات والانتماء، وفي الرواية، تبدو نور في غير مكانها، بلا هوادة، لأنها عالقة بين ثنائيات الشرق والغرب، وسط واقع موسوم بالتوبوفوبيا / فيليا، وعليه؛ يوضح هذا المقال كيف استطاعت أبو الهوى إظهار صراع البحث عن الوطن والانتماء للفلسطينيين وأبنائهم خارج الوطن الأم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: اللا-مأوى، الانتماء، العرب الأمريكيون، الشتات، توبوفوبيا / فيليا.

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